

## **Just Between Us by LiaGwriter**

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**Summary:** Dustin takes the Party on a misadventure, which leads to a special moment between Mike and El. \*Part of the Stories from Summer series, with the prompt: a "Stand By Me" moment.

## Just Between Us

**Author's note:** This is a contribution to the Stories from Summer series that some ST fic writers started on Tumblr, and you can find the list on my blog writer-lia. My prompt was: a *Stand By Me* moment, so here is my little homage!

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It was Dustin's idea to take the train tracks.

He'd made a valiant effort to convince the Party to follow him. When they'd biked away from Will's house earlier, they were already hot and tired and eager to get to the quarry for a swim. But Dustin kept saying there was something really cool he wanted them to see - something he called a "swamp grotto", that he swore was no more than ten minutes out of the way.

The problem was, Dustin's "out of the way" often meant a crazy detour during which he forgot the directions and ended up leading the Party around in aimless circles. One time, he spent almost two hours dragging them through the forest just to show them an odd looking tree trunk that he wanted Mike to use as inspiration for the next D&D campaign.

Though luckily infrequent, these misadventures always resulted in sore feet and surly tempers - which, on this particular blistering July day, were almost at a boiling point. The sun sat unadorned in the cloudless blue sky, and the cicadas hummed at a near-deafening pitch. There was zero shade on the tracks, and as the sun glinted off the hot metal beneath his feet, Mike swore he could hear his sunburn forming.

"Dustin, how much further?" It was Lucas, his voice cutting into the stifling air. "It's a hundred freaking degrees!"

"That is both a lie and a gross exaggeration," Dustin shouted. "It's approximately 90 degrees Fahrenheit."

Lucas began to respond, but Max interrupted him. "If we're not there in the next five minutes, I'm turning around," she said. "I'm not about

to burn to a crisp just so I can look at some stupid puddle."

"It's not a puddle!" Dustin yelled back. "It's a swamp grotto!"

In unison, Max and Lucas let out an exasperated sigh. From his vantage point, Mike could see Will tugging Dustin's arm to hurry him forward.

They were walking in sets of two; Dustin and Will in the lead, Lucas and Max just behind them, and Mike and El bringing up the rear.

Mike felt slightly guilty as he listened to his friends complain. He'd been the one to help convince them to follow Dustin, even though the idea of ditching their bikes and walking down the tracks in full sun was wildly unappealing. He'd never admit it, but it was because El was with them for the day - and Dustin's wandering would buy them at least another half hour together. It wasn't much, but Mike would take it; even a few minutes longer with her was worth a miserable walk in the heat.

When it came to El, it had been a good, albeit frustrating summer so far. She was still technically supposed to be in hiding, but Hopper had relaxed the rules enough so she was able to come with the Party on most of their outings. Otherwise, Mike had to go to the cabin to see her - having El over at his house wasn't something they'd quite figured out yet.

But the cabin wasn't easy to get to and Hopper was worried about raising suspicion, so Mike's visits there were limited. He tried his best to be understanding, especially because he knew it upset El when he lost his patience. She wanted to spend time with him just as badly. But after being apart for so long, it was hard not to get frustrated over the fact that they couldn't just see each other whenever they wanted.

Regardless, everything had gotten better since summer started because El didn't feel as cooped up. There had been a few moments where Mike had seen her be truly carefree for what felt like the first time: when she was riding on the back of his bike on the way to the diner for a milkshake, or learning how to skip rocks on the lake at Hopper's trailer, or roasting marshmallows by the fire pit at Will's

house. They were still learning each other, and so far, seeing El smile and laugh and watch in amazement when Mike showed her something new was his favourite lesson.

They walked with a few fingers laced together; it was too hot to even hold hands, but they still wanted to be connected in some way. Noticing that she'd been quiet for a while, Mike nudged her with his elbow.

"Hey," he said gently.

She turned her head and smiled up at him.

"Hi."

"What are you thinking about?"

It was a question he asked all the time. Even though he knew it was probably annoying, he couldn't help it. He could usually tell what was on her mind; El was nothing if not direct, her emotions clear even when she couldn't find the right words. But sometimes she retreated, looking sad or lost in a way that worried Mike. This time, he could sense that she was choosing her words carefully before she spoke.

"The last time we were here," she replied.

Mike thought back to it. The last time they'd been on the tracks together was the day they'd all gone looking for Will. It so long ago now, but as soon as Mike replayed the memory, it felt as fresh as though it had happened yesterday. They'd hardly known each other then, but it was the day El had said two simple words to him - words he'd never forget, words that still made his heart leap when he thought about them: I understand.

"A lot's happened since then," he said, still unsure of what was going through her mind.

When El replied, her voice was low. "A lot of bad things..." she said, shaking her head. She moved her fingers to intertwine fully with his, giving his hand a squeeze. "But a lot of good things, too." She smiled - that beautiful, bright smile - and looked up at him. "Really good

things."

Mike's heart sped up and he found himself unable to hold back a grin. There was so much he wanted to say back, part of the repertoire of things that flitted through his mind constantly, like: *You're the best thing that ever happened to me*, or *Being with you makes me so happy*, or, more recently, *I love you, El.*

That one scared him for its sheer strength, how present it always was at the tip of his tongue, threatening to escape before he was ready to say it. Right then would've been an okay time, but the silence between them felt so comfortable, so content and right that he didn't want to spoil it. *I'll tell her soon.*

Before he could say anything, El stopped suddenly, tugging Mike to an abrupt halt with her.

"What's wrong?"

"Do you hear that?"

Panic flooded through Mike's chest. "Hear what?"

She didn't reply. She listened intently, her eyes trained to the ground. A flashback of being ambushed by Troy and James flitted through Mike's mind and he braced himself, ready to run. But just before he could act, there was a rustling sound, and Mike turned to see a deer emerging from the forest next to them. It was small, not quite a baby but not full grown, light brown and speckled with white spots.

El let out a soft gasp and Mike placed a finger over his lips, signalling for her to stay quiet. She nodded, turning back as the deer moved forward a little. It lowered its head to graze at the sparse grass by the side of the tracks. A few moments passed before it sensed their presence, its ears flicking back and forth. The deer lifted its head then and stared, its large brown eyes fixated on a spot between Mike and El's shoulders.

Mike glanced at El, who was looking at the deer with that same expression of amazement he'd seen so many times before. The deer was stock still, one of its hooves lifted, as though it was ready to bolt

at any moment. Looking ahead, Mike could see the rest of the Party getting further away and though he began to worry, he felt rooted in place, like a spell had been cast. He wondered for a moment if El was using her powers to keep them both still, but when he shifted on his feet he felt no restraint.

The deer moved then, lowering its head back down to graze, deciding that they weren't a threat. Mike looked over at El again. She'd lifted one of her hands and was reaching it forward, just like she did when she was about to use her powers. But for some reason Mike could tell it was different. Her movements were timid, her fingers curled in a little, like she was looking at a glass statue and wondering if she should touch it.

She was close to the deer, but not close enough that she'd be able to touch it without scaring it off. He watched as she took a cautious step forward. As soon as her sneakers made the slightest crunch against the gravel, the deer froze. It lifted its head and looked straight at El, who had also stopped moving. There was a tense few seconds where time seemed to slow down. The cicadas hummed, and the air was still as Mike waited with baited breath. Then, in a swift movement, the deer turned and ran into the forest, its tail swishing as it slipped silently back into the trees.

Seconds passed and then it was like the spell had been broken. Mike moved closer to El, who was standing in the same position, her hand raised. He noticed with alarm that a single tear was trailing down her cheek. He placed a hand on her arm and she winced.

"El? Are you okay?" he asked, reaching for her hand.

"Yes," she replied, her voice barely a whisper.

"Are you sure? You're... you're crying."

She frowned and brought her hand to her cheek, clearly surprised to find that there was moisture there. She returned his gaze with a mix of surprise and embarrassment.

"Oh."

"It's okay," he said, rushing to reassure her. He wanted to pull her close, but she still seemed distant, like she was waking up from a dream. He held tightly to her hand as they walked on, a little slower, the sun beating relentlessly down.

Somehow, Mike understood why she'd had that reaction. That was something he was also learning about being with her - that they were able to communicate without words, that sometimes a look or a hand squeeze was enough. Maybe she'd never seen a deer before and was surprised, caught off guard by the rare and graceful sight. Maybe it was something she'd never expected to see and she felt lucky, again reminded at how different her life would've been had she never escaped, had Mike never found her that night in the rain. Either way, she didn't have to explain. Her hand in his was always enough.

"Beautiful," she mumbled after a while.

"Hm?"

"The deer," she explained. "It was... beautiful."

She emphasized the word as though she were testing it out, seeing if it fit the way she wanted it to.

Mike nodded. "It was."

They walked on in silence again, before Mike realized abruptly that they'd lost sight of their friends. He had no idea what direction the supposedly awesome thing Dustin wanted to show them was, meaning that they were walking aimlessly without him. He stopped.

"Shit."

"What?"

"I don't know where everyone went."

"Oh, it's okay," she said, pulling him forward again. "They're not too far ahead."

Mike frowned. "How do you - "

"I looked," she replied, shrugging.

Mike smiled to himself. No matter how often it happened, he was still in awe of her powers - especially now that he sometimes couldn't even tell when she was using them. She was becoming quicker at getting to the void; with enough concentration and quiet, she could usually get a clear picture of where somebody was in just a few moments.

"Can we not tell them?" she asked, and Mike had to rack his brain for what she meant before she added, "About the deer?"

"Oh," he replied. "I mean... sure. We don't have to."

"I know it's bad to keep secrets," El said, reading his mind.

"No, not always," he told her. "There are bad secrets. But then there are some you keep just because... because you only want to share it with certain people, you know?"

"I only want to share this one with you."

Mike was grateful that the heat had already flushed his skin, so his fierce blush wasn't as obvious.

"Sure, El. Plus, we probably won't even have to come up with an excuse for why we fell so far behind. They probably assumed we were just making - "

He stopped, aware that he was on the verge of embarrassing himself. But as usual, El didn't let him off the hook.

"What?" she asked, so innocently that Mike cringed. "What did they assume?"

"Nothing," Mike mumbled.

She stopped, letting go of his hand and crossing her arms as she turned to face him. Mike tried desperately to avoid eye contact.

"Mike." Her voice was stern, making it clear that she wouldn't let it go until he explained.

He skidded his foot on the gravel below, his blush deepening. "That, uh - that - I mean, they probably think we're, you know - "

But El didn't let him finish, stepping forward and placing her hands on his shoulders. Their eyes met in a flash and then she leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. Mike squeezed his eyes shut and kept them that way even after she pulled away, his heart racing wildly.

"Doing that?" El asked.

Mike opened his eyes to find her smirking at him and he laughed, shaking his head. She knew what he'd meant all along and was actually *teasing* him over it.

Saving him from having to come up with an embarrassing reply, El grabbed his hand again and they kept walking, quickly falling back into a comfortable silence.

After about ten minutes - but what felt like much longer in the ever-increasing heat - El mercifully steered them off the tracks and into the shade of the trees. They walked for another few hundred yards before the rest of the Party came into view. They were huddled around a small body of water - the "swamp" portion of Dustin's purported "swamp grotto."

Lucas, Dustin and Max were deep in some kind of argument, so Will was the only one to notice Mike and El's arrival. He smiled at them and then rolled his eyes, evidently fed up with the bickering that had likely been going on for too long already.

"Listen, I don't know where you picked the word grotto but this isn't even *close!*" Lucas spat.

Dustin looked furious as he gestured towards a series of rock formations jutting out of the murky water's edge. "Do you see that overhang? It's an ancient rock formation!"

"Ancient rock formation?" Max scoffed. "I think you mean blocks of concrete."

Lucas laughed, and Dustin put both hands on his head, giving up. "Like casting pearls before swine," he muttered. He turned and caught

sight of Mike and El.

"Hey! You guys caught up!"

"Ah, the lovebirds came up for air," Max said, smirking.

Lucas cut him off, making a noise somewhere between disgust and annoyance. "So you mean to tell me these two have been sucking face the whole time we've been here looking at this stupid swamp?"

"We weren't - " Mike began, but Dustin's shouting cut him off.

"You forgot grotto Lucas - swamp grotto, that's the correct term."

Lucas groaned again. He grabbed Max's hand and started leading them back to the train tracks. "Whatever you say, Dustin."

Predictably, Dustin's "must see" hadn't panned out the way he wanted it to. He turned to the rest of the Party, looking crestfallen. El stepped forward then, placing a gentle hand on Dustin's shoulder.

"I think it looks like a grotto," she said, doing her best to sound hopeful.

Mike knew instantly that she was bluffing, but Dustin seemed to buy it. He perked up instantly.

"You think so?"

She smiled. "I do. But can we go to the quarry now?"

Dustin nodded. "Let's do it."

The three of them headed the way Max and Lucas had gone, resuming the same order, but with Will in the lead this time.

They were almost back at the tracks when Dustin stopped and turned around. "So what really held you guys up?" he asked.

Mike glanced quickly at El to find her smirking, a mischievous grin playing at her lips. Dustin obviously didn't buy Lucas's accusations, but at this point Mike wondered if it was even worth it to come up

with a different excuse. Before he could decide, El spoke up.

"We were making out."

Mike felt his jaw drop, but El simply gave an innocent shrug.

"Geez, you guys," Dustin muttered, shaking his head.

They climbed back up onto the tracks and Mike felt El give his hand a squeeze. He smiled at her, knowing implicitly what it meant. She still wanted to keep their secret, however harmless, just between them. He thought about how she'd reached for the deer, her eyes wide, amazed, hopeful.

He squeezed her hand back, as if to say, *I know. Just between us.*